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University of Illinois

Graduate College

*THE AMERICAN ARTS AND
AMERICAN FREEDOM: A WORLD VIEW*

By Allan Nevins

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*DeWitt Clinton Professor
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Columbia University



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FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE GRADUATE COLLEGE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

This year the University of Illinois is celebrating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the formal opening of its Graduate School, which was inaugurated in 1908. There had been graduate instruction prior to that date, but the work was conducted by the individual departments without uniformity of aims and standards. The first graduate students were enrolled in 1874, and by 1903 the graduate population comprised 3 per cent of the total enrollment. Only master's degrees were awarded at first, but in 1903 the first two candidates for the doctorate received their degrees.

By 1906 the need for an expanded graduate program became apparent and President Edmund J. James appointed a "Committee of the Graduate School." This Committee drew up plans which culminated in the formal opening of the Graduate School in February, 1908, under Dean David Kinley, who was later to become President of the University.

Starting with an enrollment of 168 students receiving graduate instruction in 12 departments, the School expanded to the point where more than 3,500 students are now enrolled in over 65 departments.

In 1947 the name of the School was changed to the Graduate College to reflect its size and breadth of interest. Besides administering programs of advanced study, the College supports a number of interdisciplinary enterprises, such as the Digital Computer Laboratory, and administers the University's fellowship and graduate scholarship programs. Drawing its students from all over the country and, indeed, the world, the Graduate College has become a true community of scholars.

FREDERICK T. WALL, *Dean
Graduate College*

LECTURES IN COMMEMORATION OF THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE GRADUATE COLLEGE

I. THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS IN RETROSPECT

MARK VAN DOREN
Professor of English, Columbia University
January 26, 1958

II. THE WORLD VIEW OF MODERNS

HERMANN J. MULLER
Distinguished Service Professor of Zoology, Indiana University
February 11, 1958

III. REQUISITES FOR SURVIVAL

HARRISON BROWN
Professor of Geochemistry, California Institute of Technology
March 13, 1958

IV. THE AMERICAN ARTS AND AMERICAN FREEDOM: A WORLD VIEW

ALLAN NEVINS
Professor of American History, Columbia University
April 8, 1958

V. UNCONSCIOUS PROCESSES AND MAN'S RATIONALITY

ERNEST R. HILGARD
Professor of Psychology, Stanford University
May 7, 1958

*Copies of these lectures may be procured from the
University of Illinois Press*

THE AMERICAN ARTS AND AMERICAN FREEDOM: A WORLD VIEW

BY ALLAN NEVINS

Bismarck at Göttingen used to like to hear his fellow student John Lothrop Motley recite American verse; William E. Gladstone, incredible as it seems, liked to sing "The Camptown Races"; Tolstoy thought *Uncle Tom's Cabin* one of the noblest works of literature. We can take some comfort in such facts now that the United States, as leader of the free world, has to hold its arts up to a close world gaze. All will agree that our leadership cannot be exerted by guns and money alone. We have to give the world intellectual and spiritual impulses; and their principal vehicle is found in letters and the other arts. What merits will our arts seem to possess under world scrutiny? What influence can they exert from Cadiz to Bangkok? These are the grimmest questions they have ever had to answer.

Lately I spent three weeks with the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean, aboard various warships. Here are twenty powerful vessels almost constantly at sea, for they have no shore base. They are equipped with the most lethal weapons known to men. The carriers and missile ships are ready at an hour's notice to devastate cities far within Russia and her satellites. Yet Admiral Charles Brown constantly emphasized to me the importance of the fleet as an agency of peace and friendship. Every two years it visits 102 different Mediterranean ports. It entertains deputations of cabinet ministers, city officials, businessmen, and teachers; it sends officers and men ashore to make friends and spend money; it gives band concerts and public fetes. As Admiral Brown expatiated on these purposes, a wild idea occurred to me. Why should not this armada include one vessel, even a humble LST, fitted up as a floating

museum of American culture? Equipped with examples of painting and sculpture, of the best books and prints, of music, and of technological skill; offering films and concerts in a special hall — would it not ring a harmonious note on those shores where the great cultures of Egypt, Palestine, Greece, Rome, and Moorish Spain flourished?

The idea, of course, is absurd. Such a ship would cost money; and with that money we could add a twenty-first warship to the fleet. But still the concept haunts me. Is it possible that the times are as crazy as the idea? For the vessel would be symbolic; symbolic of the fact that if we win the world, it will be by our culture, our ideas, and our arts no less than our power.

Now that we are the chief leader of the free nations, our letters and the arts must have a greater immediacy to them; perhaps, then, we have to look at these cultural assets in a new light. We might consider three questions: How important are our letters and our arts to ourselves? What is their central meaning to us? What is or should be their meaning to other nations — allied, neutral, or hostile? The first two matters we can consider together: the importance of artistic self-expression to us, and the estimate we put on its interpretive or creative values.

Naturally our letters and arts mean far more to us than to any other nation; and we can safely say that in 1958 we regard them as much more important to us than we did in 1900. We have gradually been taking a new attitude toward them.

We have been getting rid of the old illusion that literature and the arts stand apart from American development, that instead of being elements in the main stream they are scenery on its banks. We have been discarding this false idea by treating letters and art as an expression of the American mind and character. In doing this we must, at some loss, give up narrow definitions; we may almost go so far as to treat literature as including the Erastus Beadle dime novel, and art as comprehending the Currier & Ives lithograph. This is one of the sound theses of Russell Lynes's book *The Tastemakers*; he correctly says that the diversity of American tastes does much to give our arts vitality and make "the museum and the corner house equally important manifestations of our culture." Even those who do not follow Mr. Lynes so far can at least accept a writer who did far more to break down the idea of a partition between American literature and the general American mind. Vernon L. Parrington's volumes on American thought con-

tributed in a revolutionary way toward making national letters, the national mind, and the national character seem integral.

That they are integral every historian knows well. The student who tries to comprehend the era of sectional conflict 1850-1865 without careful study of the Biglow Papers, Whittier's antislavery poems, the polemics of William Gilmore Simms, Hawthorne's paper on Washington in 1862, Holmes's essay "My Hunt After the Captain," Melville's war verse, Winslow Homer's early painting, and the work of James E. Eads as engineer would go sadly astray. This new attitude gives us a better sense of the importance of our letters and art. We have a deep yearning not for productions which we can give thin aesthetic study, about which we can brag to other peoples, but for cultural roots, for channels with the past, deep-gripped in our own environment, from which we can draw nutriment. A rootless people is a shallow people.

The arts seem more important to us because we have learned over the last half century that art and life are inseparable. They interact. Obviously the more we improve our national life the more we shall improve our arts. That is what Matthew Arnold taught when he talked not only of attaining a better culture than that of the Philistine mass but of diffusing this better culture among the Philistines. Conversely, the arts have an elevating function. Bernard Berenson tells us what, in his opinion, takes place when a work of art is placed before us. If we observe it closely and really digest it, we cannot help merging ourselves a little with it. We absorb the mood of a painting, a novel, a poem, and we tend to imitate the action of the figures treated. "The artistic creation," writes Berenson, "beyond the ideated sensations which it may convey, penetrates into the depths of our organism through our proneness to identify ourselves with objects, and to imitate them." On the crudest level of art or pseudo art, the motion picture, we can readily see how viewers get a moral or immoral effect from, say, *The Ten Commandments*. On the higher levels, it is more difficult to perceive just how *The Scarlet Letter* had elevated American life, but assuredly it has. To Berenson such a book meets the highest test of art in that it lifts us to "a higher competence," is thus "life-enhancing."

As we have been ridding ourselves of the illusion that letters and the arts stand apart from general American development, so we have been discarding the idea that they do not deserve close study. That was the attitude of most critics a half century ago. Barrett

Wendell wrote a history of American literature which treated every book written west of the Berkshires with scornful condescension. George Edward Woodberry declared that America had produced no poet equal to Gray. Van Wyck Brooks in his first book, *America's Coming of Age*, regarded our literary and artistic heritage as reedily callow. Santayana asserted that he could see in this heritage only a "harvest of leaves," with no fruit. We still hear echoes of this denigrating school. Louis Kronenberger in his recent book on American culture prissily remarks: "The compelling fact about art in America is that it is not organic. It has almost no share in shaping our life; it offers, rather, compensation for the shapelessness. . . . Like the Romans and the Germans, we are not an artistic people."

The truth is just the opposite: Art in America *is* organic; large elements in the American people *are* artistic. The level of taste and performance has risen, and is rising. Look about us and we see evidence of the general acceptance of these facts.

Judgments on our literature have been revolutionized since Barrett Wendell's day, and curt dismissal has given place to respectful study. The work of Parrington, Carl Van Doren, Edmond Wilson, F. O. Matthiessen, and others has lifted the study of our letters to a dignified plane. As late as 1912 the only course in American literature at Columbia was a necessarily superficial one given by John Erskine, and most universities neglected the subject. Today, no reader of the *London Times* Literary Supplement can help noting that it gives American literature a great part of its attention, and that much of this attention is historical. The latest full history of our letters, by Willard Thorpe, Henry S. Canby, and Robert Spiller, requires 1500 pages for its treatment — and it treats literature as integral with other expressions of the American mind and character. Nothing is more significant than Van Wyck Brooks's change of front. Coming to jeer in his early writings, he remained to study and admire in every book which followed his *Emerson* (1932). His five volumes of *Makers and Finders: A Study of the Writer in America, 1800-1915*, seem to some captious students too impressionistic, uncritical, and full of false historical notes to be a truly searching study; but at any rate he acknowledges the high value of the literary work of the republic and offers much data to establish it. He treats our writing as expressing all of American life, and he exalts the American tradition.

Perhaps one source of the notion that American life was

inherently hostile to letters and the arts still exerts some influence. It is a tendency in some quarters to depreciate democracy. H. L. Mencken's satirization of the booboisie bore the thesis that American life is so incurably vulgar that it can no more produce art than crabgrass can produce honey. The sort of attack that Mencken launched against Texas politicians, against pantalettes on the piano legs, against the old lady from Des Moines, against what he called "beautiful letters," against Lord Hoover, and against the "wowsers," refreshing as it was in its independence, undermined any belief in our general capacity for artistic expression. Combined with Mencken's total inability to understand poetry, his deep hostility to academic critics like Brownell and Stuart P. Sherman, and his mockery of the polite world, it specially undermined any belief in the literature that a democratic society could produce. But this particular attitude now seems very remote; democracy has won too many signal triumphs in the last quarter century.

It is to be hoped that we are discarding still another illusion about the vitality and importance of American literature and arts, the delusion that after flowering in a truly Jeffersonian America — the pre-Civil War America of Lewis Mumford's *Golden Day* and Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* — they were cast prisoner and fettered by the industrial revolution. Few would deny that the 1850's were one of the great decades in American literature and arts. But then the 1880's was also a great decade, probably unmatched in the production of distinguished fiction; and the 1920's was another. This belief that industrialism throttles art is, of course, part of Mr. Kronenberger's critical doctrine. It is part of Russell Blankenship's, as he shows in his book *American Literature as an Expression of the National Mind*. The general concept is summed up by a writer of distinction in these sentences:

The Gilded Age saw, for all practical purposes, the closing of the frontier and the national extension of a dominating industrialism, standardizing life and outlook, making men but cogs in an inhuman machine which swept employer and employe indiscriminately within its grasp. Man, the free soul, found a new and more terrible master, and the pioneer's claim to equality was mocked in his passing. These changes were inevitably, and almost immediately, reflected in literature. The brief period of attempted escape once over, the realization enforced that art, if it were not to abdicate, must face the enemy, there appeared in American literature a despair expressed in terms of scientific determinism, deepening from the qualified realism of William Dean Howells, who could still regard "the more smiling aspects of life" as the most truly American, to the comparatively qualified naturalism of Dreiser, and, in another manner, of Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner.

This cant — the cant of the pseudo-liberal — is postulated on three errors. The first is a romantic misconception of the rural egalitarian age; the second is a failure to understand what industrialism is and what its real impact has been; and the third is a refusal to see how constantly and radically industrialism has changed.

As for the fable of a golden age of Jeffersonian yeomen and Emersonian village thinkers, a Charlottesville and Concord over-spreading the entire American map, we need only point out that rural life has had assailants as fierce as any critics of urban industrial life, and as truthful. From Edward Eggleston writing on the Hoosier frontier to Harold Frederic depicting the provincialism of upper New York, from Joseph Kirkland's account of *Zury, The Meanest Man in Spring County*, to William Faulkner's record of the still meaner Varner family in *The Hamlet*, the shabby, sordid, and sometimes cruel aspects of rural life have never wanted honest painters. As for industrialism, it was ugly enough in 1880. But mass production brought a beneficent new industrialism after 1913, automation is bringing a still better order, and technology and science promise yet greater benefits to come.

Anyone who studies the real nature and impact of industrialism knows that it has — in the long run — not meant standardization but rather a multiplication of the varieties of commodities and luxuries available to us; not poverty but a steady elevation of the standards of life, and a striking extension of its horizons; not less beauty but more beauty. Walt Whitman and Emerson, as Newton Arvin has pointed out, were not assailants of industrialism. Rather, these seers accepted it and its valuable potentialities. That materialism has been one of the curses of American life, and that preoccupation with the dollar has done much to limit American attention to the arts, is of course true. But materialism long antedated industrialism. It was interwoven in the texture of a society which had to conquer raw nature, the Indian, and the wild beast, and to gain sustenance by steadily pushing the frontier westward. The hostility of Concord was to materialism, not industrialism.

In a hard practical sense, industrialism has increasingly provided release from materialism. As Henry Ford said, the greatest materialist is the man without enough clothing, enough housing, or enough food; he can think of nothing but his wants. When industrialism fills the land with plenty, as it does, men can think of higher matters. The decades have proved that letters and the arts

increasingly flourish in an industrial society. Our children, in a greater age of plenty than we know, will take it for granted that the arts could not flourish so well anywhere else. As Lucretius, Dante, and Goethe devote poetry to science, so they will devote it both to science and to its enriching applications.

Altogether, the American people have come a long way since 1900 in appreciation of literature and the arts. We are convinced in 1958 of their great, varied, and immediate importance. We are convinced that they do not stand apart from our general development, but are part of the main flow of American life. We believe that their history deserves careful study if we are to have any sense of our roots in the past. We are confident that they can flourish in a democratic society and in an industrial economy. What now of our other great question?

The question, essentially, is this: What is the meaning of the American spirit to the world, to the sixty diverse peoples who so often find us hard to understand? If the answer is to be found anywhere, it must be largely in our arts: in poems, novels, statues, symphonies, and architectural creations. Now that we are leader of the Western world, and part of the East too, they will assuredly be studied abroad. Do they really have anything to say?

We would be unpatriotic if we did not face these questions candidly. We cannot let patriotic emotions lead us astray. The Hindu editor, the Italian politician, the Scandinavian professor will look at anything American with harsh realism. They will be repelled by much of what they see. A great deal of modern advertising all over the world is debasing — and ours is the most blatant of all. Much that motion picture producers of all nations send to the screen is debasing — and Hollywood leads the way. Sensational newspapers in all lands are debasing — and we did much to invent them. All this falls below the level of art, but it affects art, and it will weigh in the judgment of foreigners. Nevertheless, we may hope that the world, as it gains some real acquaintance with our letters and arts, will find in them at least three affirmative values.

They should find, to begin with, that a great deal in our arts expresses an alert instinct for functionalism married to aesthetic values. We are a pragmatic people. The sculptor Horatio Greenough, the first eminent apostle of functionalism, declared that the form of a work of art, like the form of a living plant or animal — an elm tree or greyhound — is a result of its function. The first really good practical axe was designed and made by American

woodsmen; with its perfect balance, its curving helve adapted to hand and arm, and its toughness derived from proper use of the grain, it was a world away from the awkward straight-handled axe of Europe; and it could often be called beautiful. This was the kind of implement fit for the lumberman who told Thoreau, solemnly: "There is a *philosophy* of tree chopping." Donald McKay's clipper ships were marvelously fast vessels and like many Yankee schooners they had an inevitable symmetry that was lovely. Then Jefferson's revolving chair with desk-arm — but for a full catalogue of such creations we must turn to Giedion's book, *Mechanization Takes Command*.

Gradually Americans and informed foreigners have awakened to the multitude of our beautiful possessions in the sense defined by Greenough. He remarked that Greek temples were beautiful as used in Hellenic religion; but as savings banks in New York they were scandalous, for their form had no relation to function. He taught that Character, Action, and Beauty are the past, present, and future of function in any human fabrication. His ideas plainly suited the American spirit. The purely utilitarian bridge that James B. Eads threw across the Mississippi at St. Louis just after the Civil War was somehow aesthetically attractive. Brooklyn Bridge, swung by the Roeblings from its massive piers, was long so regarded, though it certainly cannot be compared in grace with the magnificent George Washington Bridge of our time. Lewis Mumford in his book *The Brown Decades* dilated upon the appeal of the first skyscrapers, which were resourcefully functional — John Root's Monadnock Building in Chicago, for example. A long line of architects have married form and function with boldly impressive results, from Louis Sullivan, who built the Auditorium in Chicago, to the designer of the marvelous Lever Building lately finished in New York.

Perhaps the most typically American union of form and function is found in the streamlining of all kinds of mass-manufactured articles. Railroad cars were first streamlined; then automobiles; then airplanes; and then a thousand other objects down to electric shavers. The industrial designer was unknown in the United States in 1900; now he is ubiquitous, and he valiantly follows Greenough. The war between design and decoration has become one of the epic American conflicts. Not many years ago Oswald Knauth, an executive of Macy's, asked the designer Henry Dreyfuss to wander about the store and redesign anything in its

hundred-odd departments he saw fit. The results were spectacular. Then the Bell Telephone Laboratories requested Dreyfuss to redesign their mouthpiece-and-receiver combination. He refused to try unless he could work in collaboration with telephone engineers, for form and function had to be allies. The Frederick Law Olmsted, father and son, carried the principle into landscape architecture. The industrial paintings of Charles Sheeler — for example, his unforgettable study of the River Rouge plant — are American to the heart; and they are American in showing that a combination of efficiency, mass, and symmetry can produce grandeur.

What else might impress those foreign observers who seek for an inner meaning in our literature and arts? Where else will they find an affirmative value?

Certainly we may hope that they will discern in our writing, our painting, our sculpture, and in all similar work an expression of American freedom. Our art is free or it is nothing. Of course, the artist in any country and any medium is usually hostile to tyranny — to authoritarian controls. Sometimes he has wrought noble achievements under a grimly repressive system; but almost always he has struggled against it. We could draw up a considerable list of men who have made terms with the autocrat, as Goethe did with Karl August; but the truer artist appears in Beethoven tearing the title-page out of his *Eroica* when he heard that Napoleon had made himself Emperor, and in Victor Hugo fleeing to the Channel Islands to indict the third empire. For a history of this long combat, from the days of ancient Babylon to those of modern Poland, we may turn to Horace M. Kallen's two learned and moving volumes, *Art and Freedom*. Whenever the artist must endure oppression and censorship, these fetters leave their scars. One striking feature of American letters and arts is their freedom from such stigmata.

To be sure, artists in America have not been so free as is desirable. They have sometimes been subject to ecclesiastical restriction, as in Catholic Boston and parts of the Protestant Bible Belt. They have occasionally felt the pressure of large economic interests, which have prosecuted extreme radicals and have penalized the honest treatment of some subjects, such as the struggles of labor. American artists have suffered particularly under the handicaps of the Genteel Tradition, which disapproved of *Tom Sawyer*, pronounced *Ben Hur* a greater work than *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, suppressed Dreiser's *Jennie Gerhardt*, and still

bends a threatening eye on Faulkner and James Farrell. Then, too, if the arts in this country are to be fully free, they must be fully equal. They must have an independent position equal in prestige and authority to that of science, religion, industry, and engineering. This they have not yet achieved; music, painting, and sculpture are far from having achieved it.

Nevertheless, in the United States the writer and artist have been exempt from all the cruder forms of political tyranny and ecclesiastical bigotry. They breathe an air unpolluted by any of the miasmas of Spain or Russia. When Andre Maurois wrote lately that for him Kansas City is "the heart of America, a steady dependable heart," he puzzled some of us. We know that everything is up to date in Kansas City; we know that the Pendergast machine was a strikingly effective segment of our politics; but what else did he see in Kansas City? We may conjecture he was thinking that it represented the brash, robust, individualistic freedom of the American West, where every man may be as independent and forthright as Mr. Truman was in addressing Stalin, Tom Dewey, and a certain music critic. People like the editor William Starr Nelson and the painter Thomas Hart Benton have said what they liked in Kansas City. Ernest Hemingway got his stylistic start there, on the *Star*. A free city, as Mr. Maurois saw. But then every other American city — St. Paul, or Santa Fe, or Pittsburgh — offers an equally free haven for the artist. Freedom pulses in all our literature, as in Walt Whitman's exultant paragraph:

Here is not merely a nation but a nation of nations. Here is action untied by strings. . . . Here is the hospitality which forever indicates heroes, Here are the roughs and beards and space and nonchalance and ruggedness that the soul loves. Here the performance, disdaining the trivial . . . spreads with crampless and flowing breadth, and showers its prolific and splendid extravagance.

The genius of our letters and art, as of our government, is freedom; only it is a special kind of wild, energetic, insouciant freedom, as depicted by Lowell:

Your goddess of freedom, a tight, buxom girl,
With lips like a cherry and teeth like a pearl,
With eyes bold as Here's, and hair floating free,
And full of the sun as the spray of the sea,
Who can sing at a husking or romp at a shearing,
Who can trip through the forests alone without fearing.

And is there any additional value of a general kind which the foreign inquirer might find in our letters and arts? Certainly

other nations should have no trouble in discerning a third great value.

Our letters and arts have been an expression of American idealism. We all remember that Coolidge said: "The business of America is business." We ought to remember that he added: "The ideal of America is idealism." Literature has been the main expression of this force, and our greatest writers, with two or three exceptions, have conspicuously been idealists. Parrington's history of American thought is largely a history, from Jonathan Edwards and John Woolman, of varying shades of idealistic thought. We find this characteristic expressed in Emerson, Hawthorne, Whitman, Lowell, and Howells; in Whittier's verse on slavery and much better poems celebrating labor; in the fiery utterances of William Cullen Bryant on the issues of his day; and so on down to Carl Sandburg and his "The People—Yes." The historians have no mean place in the roll, from Prescott and Motley inveighing against tyrannies of the flesh and spirit to Henry C. Lea's memorable polemic against intolerance called *The Expulsion of the Moriscos from Spain*.

This foggy word "idealism" requires definition. Perhaps we can say that its best American expression has been distinguished by its radical edge; it is the idealism of revolt. That unlikely figure Huckleberry Finn well expresses it. Among Huck's many fine traits the chief was his revolt against polite artificiality as typified by "the widder" and her constraints. Huck was always guileless, always inquisitive, always ready to try something new, always at heart practical and good. A realist, he was never shocked by his recurrent experiences of human knavery and folly: the criminality and indecency of the Duke and the King, the hypocrisy of the campmeeting preacher, the brutality of the feuding Shepherdsons. But he was never fooled either, and his sympathies went out to the wronged, like the two orphaned sisters. He gladly ate, drank, voyaged, and fraternized with the colored boy Jim, and brought up the really practical plan for Jim's rescue from slavery. He had an ironic, an astringent benevolence, so that we find him saying:

It don't make no difference whether you do right or wrong, a person's conscience ain't got no sense, and just goes for him *anyway*. If I had a yeller dog that didn't know no more than a person's conscience does, I would pison him. It takes up more room than all the rest of a person's insides, and yet ain't no good, nohow.

This astringent, ironic edge gives American idealism its best flavor. We go wrong when we associate idealism with sentiment-

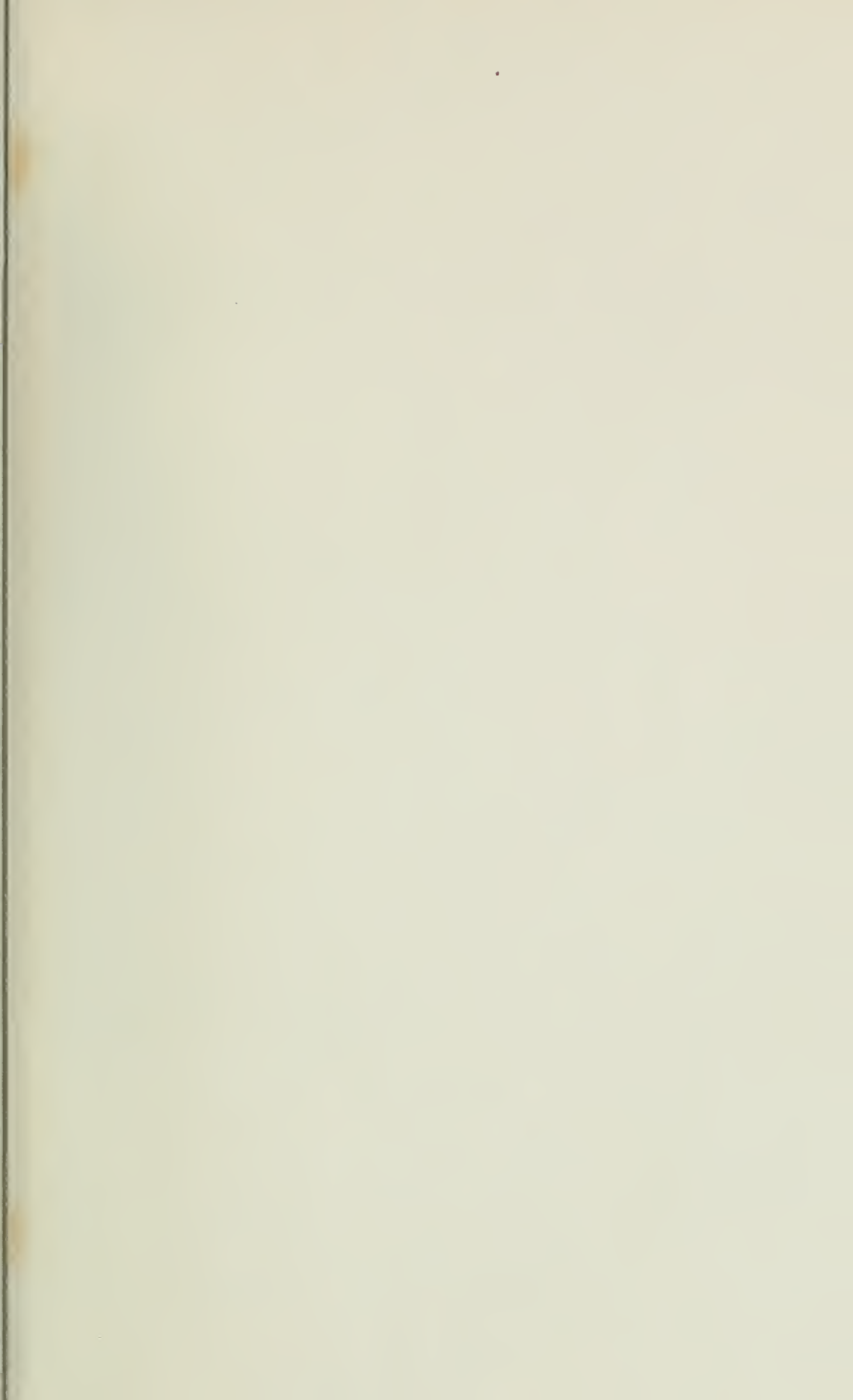
tality. Beyond question, the greatest single enemy art has had in America is sentimentality: the gush, the rhetoric, the emotionalism which led Artemus Ward to say that his best compliment for General Grant was, "He never slopped over." Americans were always slopping over, as in Mrs. Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and Leutze's preposterous painting of Washington crossing the Delaware, and James Whitcomb Riley's verse. But the true American idealists were tough, skeptical men like Benjamin Franklin, Lincoln, and Mark Twain: too good to be harsh, but with an acid humor, a keen eye for buncombe, a sense for the jugular in pretence and injustice alike. It was the idealism of Mark Hanna's fierce comment on Mr. Pullman's model housing at extortionate rents. It was the idealism of Harry Hopkins going to England for Roosevelt while Hitler's invasion impended, listening impatiently as Churchill treated this ex-social worker to a talk on British social services, and cutting him short with: "We don't want to hear about that. We want to know what you can do to stop that damned S.O.B."

The idealism that counts is not simply the idealism of revolt and reform; it is the idealism of tough-minded revolt. It is the idealism that gets down to fundamentals. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was sentimental not because it dripped tears but because, like some more recent books, such as Lillian Smith's *Killers of the Dream*, it neglected the fundamental reason for the bad treatment which white Americans have given black Americans: to wit, the profound fear of miscegenation felt in all mixed communities. We have increasingly gotten more astringence and toughmindedness into our idealism; and as we came up to the tasks of the United Nations and Marshall Plan, it was high time.

To sum up: American literature and the arts are an organic part of American life; they are not part of the scenery, but of the central flow, and the best part. They deserve the most careful study, for study is nutriment, and as Harriet Monroe said, great audiences make great poets. They are no more alien to modern industrial society than they were to the rural world of Emily Dickinson. We may hope that insofar as we can get the sixty-odd nations of the world to look at them, they will be seen to express three great traits of our national character: our versatile practicality, our devotion to freedom, our hardheaded idealism. As we present our literature and arts to the world, our chief regret must be over their deficiencies. The great mountain peaks do not loom up in our cultural landscape: no Shakespeare, Beethoven, or Galileo. We must try

to do better. Now we have come into a new age. Always in the old days we had a feeling that we were writing a rich, adventurous story with a happy climax just ahead. Everything was going to turn out gloriously in the next chapter. We would win the Revolution, or we would save the Union, and all would then be peace and progress. Now, suddenly, we have no such faith in the next chapter. We know that at best it will be bleak. We begin to see American destiny in the stern image suggested by George Creel in 1951: "Like those damned hills of Korea. You march up one, but there's always the sinking feeling that you are going to have to march right up another."

Perhaps the result will be a gain to the national mind and character, and thus eventually to letters and the arts. Our survival may depend on such a gain; in the long run the world will be won by the nations with the richest panoply of creative ideas, of great novels, poems, and paintings, of messages which compel the minds of people all over the globe, rather than the nations with merely the biggest store of bombs.



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